

The Great War Retold

Book Review

[Ralph Raico](#)

These are boom times for histories of World War I. Like its sequel, though to a lesser degree, it seems to be the war that never ends. Works keep appearing on issues once considered settled, such as the "Belgian atrocities" and the reputation of commanders like Douglas Haig. Last year, Cambridge published a collection of 500-plus pages on one of the most exhaustively examined subjects in the whole history of historical writing, the origins of the First World War. As for general works, in the past few years at least six have appeared in English, by both academic and popular historians. *The Western Front: Battle Ground and Home Front in the First World War* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003) by Hunt Tooley, who teaches at Austin College in Texas, falls into the academic category, and for such a short volume (305 pages) it offers a very great deal indeed.

Tooley traces the roots of the world-historical catastrophe of 1914—1918 to the Franco-Prussian war, which, while achieving German unification in 1871, understandably fostered an enduring resentment in France, "a country that was accustomed to humiliating others during 400 years of warmaking and aggression" (p. 5). Bismarck sought to ensure the Second Reich's security through defensive treaties with the remaining continental powers (the ones with Austria-Hungary and Italy constituted the Triple Alliance). But under the new (and last) kaiser, Wilhelm II, the treaty with Russia was permitted to lapse, freeing Russia to ally with France. The over-ambitious Wilhelm's extensive naval program was perceived by the British as a mortal threat; starting in 1904 they developed an *entente cordiale* (cordial understanding) with France, enlarged in 1907 to include Russia. Now the Germans had good reason to fear a massive *Einkreisung* (encirclement).

A series of diplomatic crises increased tensions, aggravated by the two Balkan wars of 1912—1913, from which a strong Serbia emerged, evidently aiming at the disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy. With Russia acting as Serbia's mentor and growing in power every year, military men in Vienna and Berlin reflected that if the great conflict was destined to come, then better sooner than later.

Tooley lays out this background clearly and faultlessly, but he points out that the period preceding the war was by no means one of unalloyed hostility among the European nations. Cooperation was also apparent, formally, through the Hague agreements of 1899 and 1907, encouraging arbitration of disputes and the amelioration of warfare, and, more important, through the vast informal network of international commerce, undergirded by what he calls the "unique advantage" (p. 8) of the international gold standard. It was a time of remarkable prosperity and rising living standards, which, one might add, provoked the revisionist crisis in Marxist thought. Offsetting these gains were the steady growth of state apparatuses and the rise of protectionism and neomercantilism, providing a pretext for colonial expansion. In turn, the quest for colonies and spheres of influence fueled the spirit of militant rivalry among the powers.

Tooley deals deftly with the intellectual and cultural currents of pre-war Europe. Contributing to the proneness to violence were a bastardized Nietzscheanism and the anarchosyndicalism of Georges Sorel, but most of all Social Darwinism — really, just Darwinism — which taught the eternal conflict among the races and tribes of the human as of other species. The press and popular fiction, especially "boys'

fiction," glorified the derring-do of war, while avoiding any graphic, off-putting descriptions, much as the American media do today.



French soldiers of the 87th Regiment, 6th Division, at Côte 304, (Hill 304), northwest of Verdun, 1916. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination in Sarajevo by a Bosnian Serb set "the stone rolling down the hill," as the German chancellor bleakly put it. Mobilizations and ultimatums followed, and a few days later the giant conscript armies of the continental powers were in motion.

In democratic Britain, the commitment to France had been hidden from the public, from Parliament, and even from most of the cabinet. The German declaration of war on Russia and France placed the Asquith government in a grave quandary, but, as Tooley writes, "the first German footfall in Belgium salvaged the situation" (p. 39). Now Foreign Secretary Edward Grey could deceitfully claim that England was joining its entente partners simply to defend Belgian neutrality.

The war was greeted as a cleansing, purifying moment, at least by the urban masses, whose enthusiasm easily outweighed the rural population's relative passivity. As Tooley states, untold millions were infused with a sense of "community"; finally they had found a purpose in their lives, "even perhaps a kind of salvation" (p. 43). Thus, back in 1914 the same dismal motivation was at work that Chris Hedges

documents for more recent conflicts, in his *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).

Especially ecstatic were the intellectuals, who viewed the war as a triumph of "idealism" over the selfish individualism and crass materialism of "the trading and shopkeeping spirit" (p. 43). The poet Rupert Brooke (who was to die a year later) spoke for many of them on both sides when he wrote: "Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour, / And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping..."

Socialist parties, except in Russia and later Italy, added their eager support, as did even celebrated anarchists like Benjamin Tucker and Peter Kropotkin.

The German strategy in the event of war on two fronts, the famous Schlieffen Plan, foolishly assumed the infallibility of its execution and ignored the factors that doomed it: active Belgian resistance, the rapid Russian mobilization, and the landing of a British Expeditionary Force (those mercenaries who, as another poet, A. E. Housman, wrote, "saved the sum of things for pay"). Tooley highlights the sometimes critical role of individual character here and at other points. The vacillating German commander Helmut von Moltke botched the invasion, suffered a nervous breakdown and was demoted.

Though many battles have been billed as a turning point in history, the first battle of the Marne actually was. The German Army cracked its head against a wall of "French decadence," some twenty-five miles north of Paris. The Germans pulled back, and the ensuing consolidation of the battle lines formed the Western Front, which would not move more than a few dozen miles in either direction for the next three and a half years.

The author explains how advanced military technology — machine guns, flamethrowers, grenades, poison gas, above all, improved heavy artillery — soon began taking a toll no one could have imagined. The interplay of military hardware and evolving tactics is set forth plainly and intelligibly, even for those who, like me, had little or no previous knowledge of how armies operate in battle.

In 1916 "the butcher's bill," as Robert Graves called it, came due, at Verdun and at the Somme. Ill-educated neoconservatives who in 2002—2003 derided France as a nation of cowards seem never to have heard of Verdun, where a half million French casualties were the price of keeping the Germans at bay. On the first day of the battle of the Somme, the brainchild of Field Marshal Haig, the British lost more men than on any other single day in the history of the Empire, more than in acquiring Canada and India combined. Tooley's description of both murderous, months-long battles, as of all the major fighting on the front, is masterly.

The author states that his main theme is "the relationship between the battle front and the home fronts" (p. 1), and the dialectic between the two is sustained all through the book.

The dichotomy of a militarized Germany and a liberal West, Tooley shows, is seriously overdrawn. To be sure, the Germans pioneered and practiced "war socialism" most methodically (at the time that this book was written, in the Federal Republic, the man in charge, Walter Rathenau, was, predictably, honored as a great liberal). In Britain, France, and later the United States, proponents of centralization and planning gleefully exploited the occasion to extend state activism into every corner of the economy.

The quickly escalating costs of the war led to unprecedented taxation and a vast redistribution of wealth, basically from the middle classes to the recipients of government funds: contractors and workers in war industries, subsidized industrialists and farmers, and, most of all, financiers. The deluded patriots who purchased government war bonds were crippled by inflation, now "introduced [to] the twentieth century...as a way of life" (p. 113). Tooley cites Murray Rothbard on one of the hidden detriments of the war: it initiated the inflationary business cycle that ended in the Great Depression.

Freedom of expression was beaten down everywhere. Many readers will be familiar with the outlines of the story as regards the United States, but Tooley fills in revealing details of the national ignominy: for instance, the U. S. attorney general's imprisonment of Americans for even discussing whether conscription was unconstitutional or for recalling that Wilson had won the 1916 election on the slogan, "He kept us out of war," and groups of Boy Scouts stealing and destroying bundles of German-American newspapers that the alert lads intuited were fomenting treason and insurrection. In some countries the suppression was worse. Australia, we learn, prohibited the teaching and use of the German language, incarcerated 4,500 citizens of German descent, and expropriated and deported those broadly defined as "enemy aliens." The aggrandizement of state power in the combatant nations reached, Tooley notes, a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* in what was probably the war's worst result: the establishment of a terrorist totalitarian regime by the Bolsheviks in Russia.

American entry had been virtually determined in the wake of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, when the terminally Anglophiliac Wilson administration declared that the Germans would be held "strictly accountable" for the loss of any Americans' lives through U-boat action, even when those Americans were traveling on armed British merchant ships that carried munitions of war. Wilson's "neutrality" was, in Tooley's term, seriously "lopsided" (p. 81), since the administration declined to challenge the British over their hunger-blockade — "ruthless, inexorable" (pp. 81—82), as well as illegal by the standards of international law — which was aimed at starving the whole German civilian population into submission. British propaganda was, as always, topnotch. Its high point was the mendacious Bryce report on the "Belgian atrocities." Admittedly, the Germans had behaved brutally in Belgium (as the Russians had in the east), but it was the report's "bizarre and clinical sadism" (p. 128) that set American blood boiling, at least the blue blood of the East Coast Anglo elite. After the desperate Germans announced unrestricted submarine warfare, Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war, not just to call Germany to account for supposed violations of U. S. rights, but to "make the world safe for democracy." How warmongering clergymen manipulated public opinion on behalf of Wilson's open-ended crusade is detailed in another recent work, Richard Gamble's excellent study, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (Wilmington, Del., ISI, 2003).

The Bolshevik *coup d'état* of November 1917 led to an armistice in the East, and the Germans launched their final, *va-banque* push on the western front. The Ludendorff offensive made some initial breakthroughs but petered out, as Erich Maria Remarque describes in the last pages of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for lack of materiel and reserves. By the summer, the American expeditionary force under John G. Pershing amounted to 2 million men, many of them keen to make the whole world safe for democracy. Their Meuse-Argonne offensive, beginning in September 1918 helped to convince the Germans that the time had come for an armistice. At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of November, the guns fell silent on the Western front.

At the Paris Conference of 1919, face to face with the seasoned and crafty politicians of the other victorious powers, Wilson, in Tooley's apt phrase, resembled "the parson showing up a high-stakes poker game" (p. 252). It was a game at which the Princeton professor was pathetically inept. Fearing a Bolshevik revolution that might engulf central Europe, "the Allies imposed as punitive a treaty as they dared upon the Germans" (p. 252). A century earlier, after the Napoleonic wars, the aristocrats at the Congress of Vienna fashioned a viable *system* that avoided general war for another hundred years. At Paris in 1919, the diplomats, now answerable to their democratic constituencies, set the stage for a virtually inevitable future conflict. Tooley very correctly places the word "peace," as in the Versailles "peace" treaty, in ironic quotes.

On the overall consequences of the war, the author utilizes Robert Higgs's conceptual framework in his seminal *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). In U.S. history it has been crises, most often wars, that result in a great expansion of state power. Once the crisis is over, the state and its budgets, deficits, functionaries, and regulations are cut back to more normal levels, but never to what they were before, and they go on from there. Ideology, the underlying political mentality of the people, is also permanently skewed in a state-receptive direction. As Tooley sums up: "If the twentieth century became the century of managerial control, of the prioritizing of group goals and group efficiency over the autonomies of individuals, families, and regions, then we will find in World War I the accelerator of processes which were emerging before then" (p. 267).

I have touched on some of the main features of Tooley's Book. Amazingly for such a short work, it contains a great deal more. The only fault I can find is its somewhat misleading title. *The Western Front* is by no means merely an account of the war in the West. In my opinion, this is the best introduction we now have to the history of the Great War altogether.

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